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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/PPD, NEA/ELA, ECA/PE/V/N/E

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SUBJECT: HEALTHCARE IN SYRIA GIVEN A SHOT IN THE ARM BY
INTERNATIONAL VISITOR EXPERIENCES

REF: A) 07 DAMASCUS 903 B) 07 STATE 132266 C) DAMASCUS 304

¶1. SUMMARY: In less than a year, Syrian program alumni from two successful International Visitor Leadership Programs (IVLPs) have generated positive change in healthcare in Syria since their return. A FY07 single country program on nursing education (ref A) inspired the seven participants to lobby doctors' organizations and the Ministry of Health for better training and more respect. The FY08 regional IVLP on breast cancer awareness (ref B) not only led directly to the first ever march for breast cancer in Syria (ref C) but also to gatherings around the country at which survivors publicly advocate for awareness and early detection. Post actively supports these activities and will use its FY09 program resources to further support these efforts. END SUMMARY.

Nurses Form Alliance with U.S. Educated Doctors

¶2. From September 8-29, 2007, seven Syrian nurses drawn from private hospitals in Syria traveled on a single-country IVLP focused on nursing education. Upon their return, the nurses immediately reached out to the Ministries of Health (MoH) and Higher Education to share the information gained during their program. One of the nurses presented a proposal to the Syrian Minister of Health to establish a 911-like emergency call network. The MoH is currently studying the proposal.

¶3. In November 2007, the nurses worked with both PD Damascus and the Al-Andalos Private Hospital to organize a panel discussion during which they talked about their U.S. experience with 25 nurses and U.S. graduate physicians. The Head of the Syrian American Medical Association (SAMA) attended and as a result agreed to extend membership to nurses and to support their efforts to improve nursing education and training.

¶4. Note: Syria boasts a large number of U.S. trained doctors, who play an active and influential role in Syrian society. Nursing education is not on par with the level of medical training for doctors, and these doctors have a vested interest in supporting better nursing. End note.

¶5. The connection with SAMA proved invaluable. In May 2008, the same group of IVP alumni nurses conducted a two-day training workshop at the Assad University Hospital, Damascus University, under the patronage of the Minister of Higher Education and in coordination with SAMA. Four hundred nurses attended.

Breast Cancer: Awareness, Detection, Survival

¶6. Two members in the Syrian Society for Breast Cancer participated in the IVLP on breast cancer awareness October 27-November 19, 2007. The program energized and inspired the two women, who upon their return to Syria staged the first-ever march for breast cancer awareness and detection in Syria on April 12, 2008. They have also

organized panel discussions in three separate Syrian cities (Damascus, Tartous, and Zabadani) to talk about the importance of awareness and early detection. One of the IVLP participants, a survivor, has used these forums to speak publicly and personally about her battle with the disease. She told PDOff she would have never dared to speak in such a way before her trip to the States.

¶17. Inspired by similar programs in the United States, the two IVP alumni worked with their organization and the Syrian Ministry of Health to start a mobile mammography program. The "mammogram mobile" will travel to rural areas to bring screening to women who would otherwise not have access to a hospital or clinic. Mammograms will be offered at low or no-cost. The Syrian Breast Cancer society is also working with the MoH to offer free mammograms two days a month at hospitals and clinics in Damascus and other major cities.

COMMENT

¶18. Healthcare is a significant area of activity for civil society in Syria. Due to the presence of a large U.S.-trained medical community with high-level connections to the Syrian regime, Embassy Damascus finds that there is interest, funding, and a strong incentive to improve healthcare and support Syrian NGOs working in this field. Post plans to program a healthcare speaker in FY2009 as well as an additional SCP, and will nominate Syrian participants for FY2009 IVLPs on healthcare-related topics.

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